

# Spanish Mahogany

By BLANCHE McMANUS.

"YOU can furnish a house here with old Spanish mahogany as cheaply as at a bargain sale." This I wrote Adelaide in an expansive moment. Adelaide was one who permitted nothing to interfere with her *flair* as a collector of household furnishings.

By means of a sixty horse-power latest creation, top gear touring car, with brakes on all four wheels—and which were needed—she came from Paris southward across the Spanish frontier to the gay Catalan capital of Barcelona to look me up—which meant for me to look up the Spanish mahogany, which meant looking up Jose, which meant—but you will see! There was a husband, of course, but he took only a paying part in the drama of the "House That Jack Furnished."

With difficulty I persuaded Adelaide to hide her automobile in one of the art nouveau garages, put her Paris clothes back in the "indestructible" and her pearls in a bank vault and wear a dress at least a month old. This as a preliminary strategic move in a ramble after bargains in old *caoba*, or Spanish mahogany, with a strain in its grain which looks like melted gold, that exhales the romance of daring days—doublons and pieces of eight, that reflects in its shining surface the mystery of gone-by days in medieval homes of stately dons and autocratic grandees, days long since before it was turned over to the second hand dealer and became merely *trastos excusados*.

Barcelona has beautiful boulevards, "ramblas," they call them, which explains why we had to ramble, an incident you will find accounted for quite clearly later on.

Through the brilliant "Rambla of the Flowers," the green flecked "Rambla of the Singing Birds," the "Rambla of the Beautiful Shade" and half a dozen other plane tree and palm tree shaded ramblas, along whose lengths all Barcelona surges gayly, ceaselessly, day and night, paying toll to the blind musicians of the tinkling guitars, dodging flocks of odorous (but otherwise cleanly) brown goats, purveyors of the city's pure milk supply from door to door, we finally arrive in the busy quarter where the streets, or *calles*, themselves are the open air shops and the sidewalks the counters.

Here in these al fresco lumber rooms—*cuartos de desahogo*—we waded through all manner of plunder, old and new, pushing between bulky Spanish women veiled in black mantillas, turbaned *nineras*, gypsies in bright fringed, silken shawls, swarthy men in *capas*, little panier laden burros, white hooded, high wheeled *tartanus*, swarms of polite beggars—not a few of them *locos* from the madhouse; picturesque porters in blue blouses and red caps, with ropes and straps over shoulders, waiting without impatience the inevitable *manana* when they will take your purchase of *despofos*, odds and ends, home for you.

I led Adelaide warily into the "Street of the Old Furniture Dealers," where in curious stone, tile roofed shacks are housed the old furniture treasures, as large a quantity in the undress—ruby *caoba* and golden *encina*—as may be found in any like area in all Europe.

"But these are stables!" gasped Adelaide, fresh from the magnificently staged antique shops of the chic spas and mondaine resorts of Europe. "No," I assured her, "just the aboriginal antique shop before it is dressed up for the tourist, though they don't even call them antique shops; indeed, one may not even hint that their commerce suggests the hoary traditions of antiquarianism in any way."

Now to find Jose, the head of the consortium which controls most of the traffic of the "Street of Old Furniture Dealers."

"But the shops are all closed!" exclaimed Adelaide, in chagrin. But Adelaide was new to shopping for antiques in Spain. I banged on a few doors and shook others, awakening nothing but echoes. Everything that is any trouble in Spain is done by proxy, so I gave two coppers to a small boy who had been following us, expecting this very thing, to look up Jose.

The *muchacho*, after half an hour's search, led us through a labyrinth to where Jose was seated in his little patio

of cool shade amid fragments of a past household grandeur, eating a *tortilla* sandwiched between two huge slices of bread which he had cooked on the brazier of charcoal before him. This he interspersed with an occasional jet of red wine thrown skillfully from a long spouted, artistically shaped wine bottle into his mouth at the same time that he held a cigarette, in a long holder of *espuma de mar*, between his lips.

The hour being but 10 o'clock, this was an uncharted meal, but in Spain one eats when hungry, not by the clock. Jose was up in a moment, bowing with the grace of a hidalgo. "Mahogany? Certainly; if the *senoras* will come day after to-morrow—"

It was necessary to be firm. Jose sighed and laid down the omelet, took from the interior of his knotted blouse a key nearly a foot long and opened a great door at the end of another dedalian labyrinth, muttering beneath his breath. "Madre de Dios"; "Ñeustra Señora del Pilar," for he came from Saragoza and seemed to feel that needed protection from two *Yanqui* bargaining wits. At that Jose was the animator of this old furniture trade, so we had to bear with him.

We entered what might have been the model of the first antique shop in the world's history, a *cuarto de desahogo* in all verity. Ancient household rubbish of every possible kind was stacked like bricks or lumber as far as the eye could penetrate the dusky gloom. Spanish antiques have an aged air all their own. We squeezed through narrow passages, stirring up the dust of ages from the dirt floor. Adelaide sneezed painfully, but kept bravely in my wake.

Jose, lighting another *cigarillo*, swung himself up into a crazy loft hung with spiders' webs and after a long interval of scurrying over our heads down dropped a squat armchair of the kind known locally as a *poltrona*, with an oval plaque back and curious arms, which gave out in the middle, the whole painted a nice black enamel.

"But I want mahogany—*caoba, caoba, comprende usted ahora*!" protested Adelaide, trained in the school of the glossy sheen of smartly got up antiques. The old furniture sales department of Barcelona is for the expert connoisseur in the unwashed and undressed period of household gods. Jose's pride was touched. He opened a murderous looking clasp knife, which bore a graven motto on its blade, which read: "My wound is mortal," and scraping down through the accumulated paint and varnish of many generations at last laid bare a bit of perfect *caoba* grain.

Yes, it would be scraped and rubbed and put into the best condition for the *senora*. "And the price?" "Fifteen pesetas." Pancho, his repairer and finisher, was there—none more able in the world, and he pointed to a shadowy nook, out of which rose a thin, weather stained little man, the tint of old mahogany himself, his garments so nearly dust color with friendly bacteria that he had escaped notice up to now. He bowed with dignity and unwadded a piece of furniture upon which he had recently been working which gleamed soft and silky as rubylite as red gold and marvellously beautiful.

"If it will come out like that tell him that I will take all the old mahogany he has got," exclaimed Adelaide, enchanted. "Three dollars for that chair! Think of it! Please tell him that I want six chairs, two sofas, two tables, a commode for the drawing room and enough more for two bedrooms; if a little of it is veneer I won't object."

This spot order Jose received politely, but without effusion. "If the *senoras* will return *pasada manana* . . ." "What does that mean?" interrupted Adelaide. "Come

the day after to-morrow?" "Impossible! Tell him we must see the rest of the pieces right now, we are leaving in a few days, I am expecting to meet friends at San Sebastian for the yacht races at the end of the week."

But these large, fluid American ideas when put into Spanish seemed to bore Jose exceedingly. It was already high noon. Business could not be taken up again until 4 o'clock, after the siesta. The next day there was a fiesta, a wedding in the family the next, but after that he might possibly have the unemployed leisure in which he might place himself at our disposal.

Thus Jose firmly, but courteously, maneuvered us out and locked the door; locked the door on Adelaide, accustomed to the obsequious, ever ready attentions of those who dealt in the antiques of convention, and just in time to permit us to contribute to a party of beggars who make the furniture shop district their stamping ground. Three picturesque *mozos*, or porters, who had been patiently awaiting us, moved off without surprise or comment and we rambled home, paying another tribute on the way to the blind



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guitarists of the Ramblas who had by this time been greatly reinforced as to numbers.

For two weeks we rambled in the direction of Jose's furniture emporium, Adelaide's friends furiously telegraphing from San Sebastian twice a day. The generosity of Adelaide had assembled a royal cortege of blind musicians continually strumming guitars in our wake. The beggars gave us a daily ovation in the Street of the Old Furniture Dealers and the patient porters were ever in waiting to carry home our purchases.

We had become experts at the game. When we had eliminated Jose's omelet hour and his noon dinner hour and his visit for political discussion at the *taberna* afterward, his siesta from 2 till 4 and the time for his afternoon cup of a mixture of cinnamon and chocolate soaked up in *ensimadas* there still remained to be reckoned with the feast days, averaging from one to five a week, during which saintly days even his normal intermittent form of business ceased.

Then, too, Jose being an *aficionado*—a bull fight fan—it was necessary, in order that he might properly sustain his reputation as an *esportman*, that he should attend at least two bull fights a week in the Plaza Nuevo, from 4 to 7, and this in its way prevented any regular punching of the time clock for the few working days that could by any stretch of the imagination be called such. As a result it took quite a considerable mileage of

sole leather to make connection with Jose's hours of business as they really were, even with the services of a battalion of boy scouts familiar with his habits, who were now regularly enrolled by us to search him out.

In a fortnight we had got together two chairs and a half, the other half representing the share of another member of the old furniture combine who did not believe in cutting prices without a substantial commission. The third week the sofa began to be spoken of casually, while in the fourth week Jose accidentally mentioned that there was a table that he knew of that he believed might be had at some future time.

When we could spare the time from our efforts at keeping up with Jose's office hours we rambled over in Pancho's direction; he, in the same two weeks, had polished as much as half of the back of one chair. We found him, a red sash wound around his waist, a gaudy handkerchief rolled around his head, braided jacket, knee breeches and white stockings, in a shady corner of his own sunny little patio, which he shared with a flock of brown goats, under an orange tree, with a pet tortoise beside him and a big green parrot swearing in seven languages over his head. "Madre de Dios; las *senoras Americanas de nuevo*!" he screamed cynically as we entered.

With Pancho we were no more productive of kinetic results than with Jose, but our visits were more restful, for here we got a few moments' repose and learned how to sit in Adelaide's chairs, listening as Pancho, expert furniture renovator, joyfully took the opportunity to stop altogether his intermittent labors to tell how the big antique emporiums of London and Paris had offered him contracts for life and fabulous sums in louis and sovereigns if he would but come to them. "But leave Spain, his Manila cigars, his Cafe de Puerto Rico and his manzanilla? Never! Besides, two pesetas a day were enough for his needs; what should he do with more?" he would ask, as he breathed on the old mahogany, a square inch at a time, stroking it tenderly with his bare hand until it gleamed with the sheen of a *senorita's* silken hair.

The indignant San Sebastian friends had now turned Parisward, we learned. Adelaide, desperate, in a Rue de la Paix costume herself, climbed up into Jose's many attics and found the sofa on the day on which Jose was presiding as referee at a pelota match in the neighborhood fronton, losing his hard earned *douros* betting on the wrong player.

Pancho then took pity on us and discovered the secret hiding place of a table, and on the strength of this kindly deed took a protracted holiday himself. The patient *mozos* still standing by, made swinging seats of their ropes and straps, which they attached to the railings and slept tranquilly through it all.

We finally brought Pancho to work at the polishing of Adelaide's mahogany in our own patio under our own eyes. He came all smiles, being very sociable, bringing his parrot and his tortoise with him, the latter "to bring him good luck," he said. Certainly an appropriate mascot.

The chief results of this displacement were musical afternoons when Pancho brought out his mandolina and gave us Spanish folk songs, trilling out "Strolling Through Madrid" and weird, plaintive Andalusian, Malaguanen and Castilian airs with a curious Arab lilt to them while we sat enthralled, with only two-thirds of one of Adelaide's tables actually polished.

At the end of the fifth week Adelaide and the 60 h. p. basely deserted the trail of antiques to catch up with that of her still importunate friends. She left me to finish the old furniture ramble, left me to ship off six months later her four chairs, one sofa and a table, the extent of her old Spanish mahogany. Against this was a hotel bill of something like \$10 a day, \$5 at least to boy scouts and deputy boy scouts sent out to look the others up, say \$10 to blind musicians, as much more to just plain beggars, though I really place it at much more, as at last Adelaide got reckless as her cortege of beneficiaries—who assured her that "God would repay"—increased daily.

Thus it was that Adelaide's six piece drawing room suite of old Spanish mahogany *de lujo*, which originally cost not more than \$25, finally totaled up into hundreds, nearly to a thousand.

Furnishing a house in old Spanish mahogany would seem to be only relatively cheap.